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BOOK REVIEW

Lauren Benton, *They Called it Peace: Worlds of Imperial Violence*

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Lauren Benton, a leading historian of law and empire at Yale, argues that we are currently living in an era of "imperial small wars." In her exemplary book, *They Called It Peace*, she traces this violent logic back from the fifteenth century onward, compellingly showing how European empires reconfigured older practices—especially raiding and captive-taking—into legal justifications for domination at what she terms "the threshold of war and peace." Marked by allegations of truce-breaking and justifying mass plunder, these so-called small wars sustained an excessively violent regime that expanded imperial power under the guise of order. Echoing her early work, Benton situates these conflicts less at the metropolitan center than at the imperial peripheries, where so-called global regimes of plunder emerged, she argues. In turn, these generated new frameworks for legitimating violence in the modern period. As Europeans asserted the authority to intervene in defense of imperial subjects and property and to reshape the laws of war from the eighteenth century onward, they helped create a new global order of "armed peace," a system dominated by imperial powers and grounded in perpetual, low-level warfare.

In the second part of this breathtakingly ambitious book—one that seeks to recover the entanglements of law and imperial violence globally and across several centuries in less than two hundred pages—Benton reconstructs how, from the eighteenth century onward, European imperial agents, from military commanders to company representatives, reconfigured legal authority to regulate warfare. Increasingly, they framed conflicts with Indigenous polities, as varied as those in the Pacific, South Asia, and Latin America, as campaigns against "rebels" threatening imperial order. Intriguingly, she reconstructs these evolving legal logics across multiple imperial theaters, clearly showing how seemingly "small wars" gave rise to new claims about European authority to wage brutal war. Rather than focusing on large-scale conflicts like the

Napoleonic Wars, Benton emphasizes throughout the book the formative role of these so-called "limited," "distant," and irregular wars in shaping the foundations of today's global legal order. Within this "regime of armed peace," another innovative concept that Benton enables to challenge portrayals of imperial violence as fundamentally "lawless," interventions against unruly Indigenous peoples were framed as restrained, targeted, precise, and brief, even as they escalated into mass violence. Law, Benton insists, was not necessary for such violence to erupt, but it often provided the useful conditions and rationales for prolonging or accelerating it. Legal justifications for so-called limited interventions—to uphold truces, to protect imperial subjects, retaliate for property loss—then enabled the rise of modernity's wars of extermination.

Benton has a masterful grip on a wide range of literatures—from the history of (international) law and imperial households to global intellectual history and regional historiographies. Combined with her global historical outlook, this makes it possible for her to productively dismantle persistent myths about the law-violence nexus. She rightly challenges progressive narratives of humanity's supposed legal march toward containing interstate war through codification, such as the Kellogg–Briand Pact (185–186). She demonstrates how continuous small wars were endemic to the (early) modern world, and questions the analytical utility of terms like "gunboat diplomacy" and binaries like "insurgency and counterinsurgency" (153, 4–5). She critiques Clausewitz-ian military history assessments that privilege tactical analyses over systematically scrutinizing those structural conditions underpinning small wars (xii–xiii, 5), and questions any neat distinctions between violence in- and outside of Europe, as Carl Schmitt did in his work. She reframes law not merely as a restraining doctrine but as a "social field," a flexible and law-like framework of expectations, practices, norms, and behavioral regularities. And she offers a necessary corrective to depictions of (early) modern violence as essentially anarchic (24).

Inevitably, writing a global history of imperial small wars across several centuries means Benton has to accept several conceptual simplifications while stretching analytical categories in ways that do not always work easily across different temporal, legal, racial, imperial, or political contexts. The book's emphasis on continuity is highly productive, though it necessarily leaves limited space to contextualize some deep, formative ruptures: in regimes of violence, legal frameworks, or conceptions of world order. Benton's account of modern-era "small wars" sometimes faces challenges in explaining their multiple and divergent logics: some oriented toward escalation, others evidently less so, as well as the competing understandings of such conflicts among various Indigenous actors.

Similarly, the emergence of genocidal violence as a distinctly modern phenomenon is briefly touched on in the book through settler-colonial Tasmania, but not extensively explored in broader comparative or global historical terms (247). By foregrounding law's enabling functions, the book gives relatively limited attention to those who foresaw the dangers of such recurring patterns of small wars, and who sought legal innovations—such as prisoner-of-war status, new ideas of sovereignty, rights, and federalism, or

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extended civilian protections—to disrupt them, often with critical unintended consequences. As the book gets closer to its temporal endpoint of 1900, it becomes harder to sustain the analytical thread of continuity amid fundamental shifts in ideas of statehood, world order, race, rights, empire, gender, and transgressive violence, especially genocide. Benton's claim that waging war had become a "European right" (3) in the nineteenth century has been recently challenged by Isabell Hull and Hendrik Simon as well.[1] Although she is absolutely right to criticize histories of the laws of war that "start and stay in Europe and the United States" (9), her book engages only modestly with the broader global laws of war historiography, drawing primarily from the works of US-based scholars.

To be sure, such analytical concessions are perhaps inevitable in a book as provocative, temporally expansive, and geographically ambitious as this one—and they are far outweighed by the immense value of it drawing powerful connections to the present. Continuities in the mechanisms of small wars persist across the Americas, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and West Africa. Nowhere are these echoes clearer than in today's strategic usages of "limited war" to uphold regional and international orders. Invocations of imperial languages of protection justify undeclared wars across borders, rationalized as restrained interventions in defense of subjects, stability, order, and peace. These acts are often (legally) understood as responses to violent provocations and/or "protection emergencies," citing hostage-taking or armed attacks, with legal necessity invoked—and Indigenous violence dramatized. Yet perpetual war continues and escalates, with calls for ceasefires running the risk of demanding fleeting interludes, and so-called small wars to protect subjects often turning into massacres. In cities like Tehran, Beirut, and across occupied territories in the Middle East, so-called small wars disrupt everyday life, dissolving accepted distinctions between war and peace, legal and illegal, military necessity and criminality, and between self-defense and aggression. As Benton rightly puts it: "imperial small wars were, and perhaps still are, the beating heart of global order" (20).

[1] Isabel Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law during the Great War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 214); and Hendrik Simon, *A Century of Anarchy?: War, Normativity, and the Birth of Modern International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

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